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Framing Social News Sites: An Analysis of the Top Ranked Stories on Reddit and Digg.

Ben S. Wasike
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, ben.wasike@utrgv.edu

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Framing Social News Sites: An Analysis of the Top Ranked Stories on Reddit and Digg

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Social media sites in general are gaining more and more prominence. However, not as much attention has been paid to social news sites like Reddit and Digg, which allow users to re-publish and vote on the news articles they deem fit for their own consumption. This study used media framing as a theoretical guide to examine the nature of the top-ranked articles posted on Reddit and Digg. Content analysis was used to determine the generic and issue-specific frames common in the said articles (n = 454). Additionally, the study sought to determine the most debated frames on the two sites. Results indicate that the human interest frame was the most common generic frame followed by technology. Science and technology was the most common issue-specific frame. The most commonly debated generic frame was human interest while entertainment was the most commonly debated issue-specific frame. Technology and science and technology were the second most debated generic and issue-specific frames respectively.

"The future of journalism is uncertain, but clearly social networking is booming," writes Stephanie Gleason for the *American Journalism Review* (Gleason, 2010 p. 6). What Gleason is referring to is an emerging phenomenon, social media, which refers to an amalgam of Web-based services that foster user-generated information. Such services include the well-known social networking sites MySpace and Facebook, the video-sharing site YouTube and the micro- blogging site Twitter. Facebook now boasts over 400 million users in just six years of operation (Facebook.com, 2010). Twitter recently experienced a 300 percent increase in membership (Gleason). One sign of the popularity of the social-media sites is the abundance of their buttons and icons on many online news sites such as CNN.com, New York Times.com, Newsweek.com and Time.com.

While most social media users go online to opine, to tweet, to blog and to post videos or simply to follow those who do, a smaller slice of the social mediasphere is doing something different. Some users are creating their own cyber newsrooms. One will find such users on the social news sites like Reddit and Digg, which allow users to post actual pre-published news articles, videos and images that they deem newsworthy. Social news sites like Reddit and Digg differ from social networking sites like MySpace or Facebook or other social media sites like Twitter because users do not generate content but instead utilize content generated by media outlets and users of other social media sites. Also, unlike similar but distinct social bookmarking sites like StumbleUpon and Delicious, Reddit and Digg deal mainly with news articles.

A user who comes upon an interesting news article may post a headline on Reddit or Digg then link it to the original source. Fellow users then read and vote on the impor-

Ben S. Wasike is an Assistant Professor in the Communication Department at the University of Texas at Brownsville.

tance of the article and subsequently the article is ranked depending on its popularity as determined by a calculated score. Popular articles get prominence and longevity while unpopular articles are voted down and buried over time. It is a form of second-level gatekeeping where equally empowered users sieve news articles that suit their needs, in sharp contrast to the hierarchical nature of traditional news production where editors determine what people will read. Social news sites are a typical example of the democratization of news, where a community of users determines what news is suitable for them.

This customized re-publication of news has real-life implications vis-à-vis the growing significance of online news. According to the Pew Research Center, more people now get their news online (40%) than they do from print (35%). Noteworthy is that over 60% of under-30 readers now get their news online (Pew Research Center, 2008). With technological advances, it is now easy to determine what online readers favor by tracking their reading habits by examining servers logs (MacGregor, 2007). Reddit and Digg take this a step further by providing insights into what online readers would publish if they were to take on the editor's role. Such information would help online newspapers to further refine their news in order to provide a better fit for their audiences.

Despite the usefulness and uniqueness of social news sites like Reddit and Digg, there exists little pertinent scholarly research. Most research on social media has focused on social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and various blogging sites. This study helps fill this gap and at the same time provides a springboard for future research on social news sites. Using content analysis, the study examines the nature of the articles posted on the social news sites Reddit and Digg. With media framing as a theoretical guide, the study seeks to determine the generic and issue-specific frames common in the said articles. Additionally, the study also seeks to determine the most debated frames and topics on the two sites.

Defining Social News Sites. In order to fully understand what social news sites are, it is important to define the overarching framework that encompasses these sites; Web 2.0. This term was coined by Internet publication magnate Tim O'Reilly in 2003 (Lister, Dovey and Giddings, 2009). His aim was to prove that the Internet was not dead after the dotcom crash, but that this occurrence was a turning point for the development of the Internet. Web 2.0 refers to a set of Web-based applications that foster user participation and control of data, availability of non-packaged Internet services, dynamic sources, multi-device software and collective intelligence (O'Reilly, 2009).

Collective intelligence is of paramount importance to Web 2.0 applications. It refers to user-generated data, co-creativity and the egalitarianism that has erased the hierarchical one-way relationship between information producers and consumers of the older Web applications that have come to be known as Web 1.0 (Lister, Dovey and Giddings, 2009). The most common Web 2.0 applications are social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook; Blogs and micro blogging sites like Blogger and Twitter respectively; video sharing sites like YouTube and lastly, social news sites like Reddit and Digg. The last two sites are the focus of study. Like other Web 2.0 applications that foster user-generated content, social news sites allow users to search and share multi-format content (BusinessWeek.com, 2010). Such content varies from mainstream online news articles to videos, pictures, podcasts and blogs.

Digg, which in 2008 was listed among the "100 Best Products of the Year" by "PC World," remains one of the most popular social news sites (PCWorld.com, 2008). Formed in 2004, Digg describes itself as "a place for people to discover and share con-

tent from anywhere on the web" (Digg.com, 2010). Users in the Digg community post entries online, which are then read by other members who then vote up or "digg" the articles according to their usefulness. Articles that are "dugg" then rise to the top of the website's listing. Articles that are not so popular receive a "bury," or a negative vote and they fall down the hierarchy of listings. Users are encouraged to submit unique stories and to leave comments after the entries. While Digg specifically states that entries are not edited, users are nevertheless bound by a set of loosely defined community guidelines that call for courtesy and discourage hate speech and spam (Digg.com, 2010).

In order to determine the ranking of an entry, Digg uses an algorithm that includes the number of diggs and buries, the time of submission and the topic of the particular entry. As stated earlier, Digg does not edit content, a common practice among Internet content providers in accordance to Section 230(c) of the Communication Decency Act of 1996. This act protects all Internet service and content providers from liability to civil suits that arise from content posted on their sites as long as the said providers do not edit the content.[1] Other activities users on Digg can engage in are commenting on entries, participating in Digg Town Halls, Digg Meetups and digging or burying DiggAds, the interactive advertisements placed on the site. Through Facebook Connect, users can also use their Facebook login information to log in through Digg.

Reddit, which derives from the phrase "I read it on reddit," is another popular social news site and describes itself as "a source for what's new and popular on the web" (Reddit.com, 2010). Within months of its creation in 2005, Reddit was receiving up to 12,000 visitors daily (Adams, 2005). Reddit was soon acquired by media giant Condé Nast under its subsidiary Wired Digital (Wired Digital, 2006).

Just like on Digg, Reddit users vote on the entries posted, but instead of diggs and buries they use good (upvotes) and junk (downvotes). Each entry gets a submission score computed by calculating the difference between the upvotes and the downvotes. Reddit too, in accordance to Section 230 (c) of the Communication Decency Act does not edit user content unless the correction is court mandated. Reddit encourages users to counter unpopular and distasteful entries by posting corrections next to them in the hope that the community will give the correction more votes and thus more prominence.

Theory: Media Framing. Robert Entman, an oft-cited theorist defines framing as follows:

> *"To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/ or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p.52)*

Media framing derives from Erving Goffman's frame analysis theory, which posits that people use the framing process to make sense of daily events. In the framing process, people use certain social cues to determine when to upshift or downshift between serious and less serious frames. While some of these social cues are self-generated, others emanate from those around us while some are learned through the media, which incorporate them in the process of producing media content (Baran & Davis, 2006).

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1. United States. Cong. Telecommunications Act of 1996. 104th Cong. 2nd session. S 652. Washington: GPO 1996. Available: http://www.fcc.gov/Reports/tcom1996.txt

In news reporting, journalists use frames to refine and present news events to the audience. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) define a media frame as a central idea that journalists use to make sense of events and consequently suggest what is at stake by using metaphors, historical examples, catchphrases and visuals. Pippa et al (2000) define media frames as the "interpretative structures that journalists use to set particular events within their broader context" (p. 10). By grouping certain concepts, phrases or even images and using these as the basis for interpretation, journalists seek to prioritize certain issues over others (Pippa, et al). Entman (1993) refers to this prioritization process as salience, a process where journalists give certain news aspects prominence, thus making them more noticeable and eventually more memorable to their audience.

Framing research has been applied in myriad ways, from the coverage of the Olympic Games to the portrayal of presidential candidates in the 2008 elections. Researchers have examined both generic frames and issue-specific frames. Issue-specific frames vary depending on the context and they apply only to certain news topics while generic frames are fixed, broad and structural (de Vreese, 2005). Generic frames are constrained to the following: conflict, human interest, economic impact, responsibility and morality (Semetko, H., & Valkenburg, 2000).

Conflict is the most common generic frame in news coverage and it endeavors to capture audience interest by portraying conflict between people, groups or institutions. *Human Interest* utilizes emotion by putting a human face to an issue or event. *Economic impact* is another common frame, and it focuses news coverage on the economic impact of certain occurrences to individuals, institutions or even entire nations. *Responsibility* attributes the consequences of or solutions for certain issues or occurrences to individuals or institutions. Lastly, the *morality* frame casts events or problems in light of religious tenets or moral dictates (Semetko, H., & Valkenburg).

As stated earlier, researchers have applied the above-mentioned frames in a variety of ways. Zaharopoulos (2007) examined the framing of the 2004 Olympic Games in Greece as reported on NYTimes.com. By far the most dominant frame presented was conflict, a generic frame that had to do with security and terrorism issues. Issue-specific frames included doping, ancient games and infrastructure. Schwalbe (2006) found a sharp shift from conflict to human interest frames during the initial phase of reporting of the Iraq war on U.S. news websites. War photos accounted for 79 percent of all online images on the home pages of the 26 websites examined during the first week of combat. By week five this number had dropped to zero percent, to be replaced by more personal images of the war, thus human-interest framing. Pertinent issue-specific frames were conquest, rescue, victory and a control frame that depicted U.S. troops being in charge of Baghdad.

Conflict also emerged as the dominant frame in the Chinese online media's coverage of the 2004 Taiwan elections. The issue-specific frames were ideology, military consequences and a game frame that depicted the elections in terms of competition, contests, criticism and victory or loss (Han, 2007). Burke & Mazzarella (2008) found gender-oriented frames on lead stories on CNN.com, FoxNews.com and NYTimes.com. The study found that these online news sites use gender mediation or the reinforcement of the male norm as their modus operandi. The study found that indeed, these news sites emphasized the dominance of the male role in their news at the expense of female roles. The cues and frames used included the omission of power identifiers for women appearing in the news, use of personal details for women and the use of unneces-

sarily gendered language. Examples of gendered language that appeared in at least half of the stories examined include: Chairwoman/chairman; spokeswoman/spokesman; and "first female tourist" in reference to women and space travel.

Similar gender-oriented framing did not escape the coverage of the 2008 Democratic primaries. In a multi-dimensional media framing study, Wojdynski (2008) found that a candidate's electability was correlated to both gender for Hillary Clinton and race for Barack Obama. Other issue-specific frames in the coverage were: Tone, with favorable framing for Obama; Topic, with a framing emphasis on the candidates' viability rather than their stand on issues; Space, where the focus of coverage on the relevance of news events to the individual campaigns was the most predominant frame as opposed to the relevance of the same news events to the nation.

Research Questions.

RQ1: What are the most common generic frames in the articles posted on Reddit and Digg?

This research question addresses the five generic frames that are the most common in the articles posted on Reddit and Digg. This study adds a sixth generic frame; technology. It was deemed important to have this extra frame since an informal survey of the articles posted on the social news sites revealed that they dealt with purely technological issues that did not fall under the purview of the five aforementioned frames.

RQ2: What are the most common issue-specific frames in the articles posted on Reddit and Digg?

Most framing studies use inductive and speculative methods to develop issue-specific frames. However, de Vreese (2005) advises researchers to adopt deductive rather than inductive methods when examining issue-specific news frames. This requires the use of concise priori categories of frames for content analysis of news rather than speculative methods that aim at discovering frames during the content analysis process. Frames used in the deductive process must satisfy four criteria: They must be easily discernible; they must be readily observable within journalistic practice; they must be distinguishable from other frames and they must also possess representational validity, meaning that they can be recognized by more than just the researcher and his or her imagination.

With these guidelines in mind, this study used issue-specific frames (Table 1) derived from a 2007 Pew Research Center report on the most-followed news topics by the American public (Robinson, 2007). Additionally more topics were incorporated from a

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TABLE 1
Issue-specific frames

War/Terrorism	Sports
Man-Made Disasters	Science and Technology
Natural Disasters	Lifestyle
Business	Entertainment
Crime and Violence	Religion
Health and Safety	Oddity
Politics	Other

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similar study by Schaudt and Carpenter, who based their study on the aforementioned Pew report (Schaudt & Carpenter, 2009).

RQ3: What generic frames elicited the most reaction from the readers?

Research question three seeks to find out which generic frames elicited the most debate. Reader reaction was measured by the number of comments left after each article posted.

RQ4: What issue-specific frames elicited the most reaction from the readers?

Research question four seeks to find out which issue-specific frames elicited the most debate and reaction was also measured using the number of user comments left after each article.

Method

Content analysis was used to collect data over a 12-day period and the sample was drawn from the top-ranked articles on Reddit and Digg. The unit of analysis was an article posted on the home pages of both sites. Reddit's home page lists the top 25 articles and Digg lists approximately the top 15 articles. Due to time zone differences, coders were instructed to code the articles after midday Central Standard Time in order to give each article enough time to receive votes and accumulate comments. Since all articles are placed on the respective sites in a hierarchy determined by their popularity, the two coders first recorded the story's ranking then clicked the hyperlinked headline to read and code the story in its entirety. Coders were trained to determine whether the story fell under the six aforementioned generic frames or the 14 issue-specific frames adopted from the Pew Research Center report and the Schaudt and Carpenter study. Since coders had to practice their judgment on only two categories, Scott's pi was calculated only for generic frames and issue-specific frames. The intercoder reliability for the generic frames was pi = .84 and pi = .86 for the issue-specific frames.

Results

Descriptives. The study yielded 454 stories from both Reddit and Digg. Users edited a majority of the headlines (60%) from their original wording before posting them online. Most stories (57%) originated from non-mainstream sources and an equal percentage of stories were national in scope as opposed to 12% international stories. The

TABLE 2
Generic Frames

	Digg		Reddit		Both	
	freq.	percent	freq.	percent	freq.	percent
Conflict	13	7.3	19	6.9	32	7.0
Human interest	85	47.8	131	47.5	216	47.6
Economic impact	12	6.7	4	1.4	16	3.5
Responsibility	23	12.9	44	15.9	67	14.8
Morality	7	3.9	31	11.2	38	8.4
Technology	38	21.3	47	17	85	18.7
Total	**178**		**276**		**454**	

TABLE 3
Issue-specific Frames

	Digg		Reddit		Both	
	freq.	percent	freq.	percent	freq.	percent
War/Terrorism	2	1.1	5	1.8	7	1.5
Man-made disasters	2	1.1	9	3.3	11	2.4
Natural disasters	5	2.8	3	1.1	8	1.8
Business	4	2.2	12	4.3	16	3.5
Crime and Violence	12	6.7	14	5.1	26	5.7
Health and Safety	8	4.5	13	4.7	21	4.6
Politics	22	12.4	32	11.6	54	11.9
Sports	9	5.1	4	1.4	13	2.9
Science and technology	45	25.3	52	18.8	97	21.4
Lifestyle	17	9.6	39	14.1	56	12.3
Entertainment	22	12.4	62	22.5	84	18.5
Religion	8	4.5	2	.7	10	2.2
Oddity	17	9.6	13	4.7	30	6.6
Other	5	2.8	16	5.8	21	4.6
Total	**178**		**276**		**454**	

most common types of articles on Reddit and Digg were stories with at least one accompanying image (37%), followed by text-only articles (16%). Stand-alone videos made up 8% of the articles posted online. Overall, both sites displayed 266 images, 62 videos and seven Flash/interactive documents. Digg users had been site members for an average of two years while Reddit users had been registered for an average of one year.

RQ1: What are the most common generic frames in articles posted on Reddit and Digg?

As shown in Table 2, almost half of all articles posted on Reddit and Digg were human interest (47.6%). Technology (18.7%) was a distant second while responsibility (14.8%) came in third. A similar trend manifested in the articles posted within the two sites.

RQ2: What are the most common issue-specific frames in articles posted on Reddit and Digg?

TABLE 4
Comments per Generic Frame

	Digg		Reddit		Both	
	freq.	percent	freq.	percent	freq.	percent
Conflict	1278	15.1	2906	4.3	4184	5.6
Human interest	3373	40	38764	57.9	42137	55.9
Economic impact	712	8.4	934	1.4	1646	2.2
Responsibility	1032	12.2	7734	11.6	8766	11.6
Morality	461	5.5	6018	9	6479	8.6
Technology	1585	18.8	10551	15.8	12136	16.1
Total	**8441**	**11.2**	**66907**	**88.8**	**75348**	

TABLE 5
Comments per Issue-Specific Frame

	Digg		Reddit		Both	
	freq.	percent	freq.	percent	freq.	percent
War/Terrorism	138	1.6	684	1	822	1
Man-made disasters	53	.6	1547	2.3	1600	2.1
Natural disasters	87	1	462	.7	549	.7
Business	203	2.4	3226	4.8	3429	4.6
Crime and Violence	598	7.1	3842	5.7	4440	5.9
Health and Safety	197	2.3	1915	2.9	2112	2.8
Politics	2046	24.2	8593	12.8	10639	14.1
Sports	213	2.5	1275	1.9	1488	2
Science and technology	1756	20.8	9600	14.3	11356	15.1
Lifestyle	741	8.8	9814	14.7	10555	14
Entertainment	855	10.1	14808	22.1	15663	20.8
Religion	566	6.7	765	1.1	1331	1.8
Oddity	641	7.6	1703	2.5	2344	3.1
Other	347	4.1	8673	13	9020	12
Total	**8441**		**66907**		**75340**	

Science and technology (21.4%), entertainment (18.5%), lifestyle (12.3%) and politics (11.9%) were the most common issue-specific frames in the articles posted on both Reddit and Digg (Table 3). Natural disasters and war/terrorism were the least frequent frames on both sites. While Digg largely mirrored this trend, entertainment was the most common issue-specific frame in articles posted on Reddit (22.5%).

RQ3: What generic frames elicited the most reaction from the readers?

Overall, human-interest stories generated the most reaction from the users, accounting for approximately 56% of all comments posted on both sites (Table 4). Technology (16.1%) was a distant second followed by responsibility (11.6%). White Reddit manifested a similar trend, conflict ranked as the third-most-commented frame on Digg (15.1%).

RQ4: What issue-specific frames elicited the most reaction from the readers?

Entertainment (20.8%) elicited the most reaction from users on both sites. Science and technology ranked second (15.1%) while politics and lifestyle tied for third (14%). Individually, Reddit and Digg performed differently. With a very slight variation, Reddit matched the overall trend. Digg, however, showed vastly different results. Politics (24.2%) was the most-commented frame followed by science and technology (20.8%) and entertainment (10.1%) (Table 5).

Discussion

This study aimed at providing insight into the mechanics of news framing on social news sites. The results show that human-interest stories trump all others when it comes to audience attention on these sites. Users on social-news sites prefer stories that empha-

size human emotion. This is a slight departure from the dominance of the conflict frame in regular news coverage (Semetko, H. & Valkenburg, 2000). Social-news site users also seem to have an affinity for technology-based news. While technology was the second most common generic frame, it was the most common issue-specific frame on Reddit and Digg. It was also the second most debated generic and issue-specific frame. This is a marked departure from the norm. Research shows that readers follow disaster and financial news the most (Robinson, 2007) and conflict is the most common generic frame in news coverage (Semetko, H. & Valkenburg).

However, conflict and economic impact accounted for the least common generic frames on Reddit and Digg while disaster accounted for only 4.2% of all issue-specific frames. It is important to note that data collection coincided with the May 2010, BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, a man-made disaster that received constant coverage in the news media. Since the abundance of the coverage of this disaster did not translate into interest on Reddit or Digg, it falls within reason to state that there is a disjunction between mainstream media news framing and social news framing. Social news users definitely have a different agenda from the mainstream news media. Since Reddit and Digg users vote on what they deem is important, this particular finding indicates that they may have an aversion to conflict-based news.

In perspective, some have argued that users of social media in general do not do journalism, implying that this disjunction in framing may count for little (Skoler, 2009). However, a recent survey by PR giant Cision and the George Washington University shows that indeed journalists use these sites for research purposes (George Washington University and Cision, 2010). Eighty-nine percent of the editors and journalists surveyed said they used blogs for research. Sixty-five percent said they used social media sites for the same purposes and 52 percent turned to micro blogging sites like Twitter for research. Over half of the journalists surveyed saw social media sites to be important for reporting and news production.

Furthermore, a new phenomenon has emerged; social media editors.[2] These are journalists appointed by their media organizations to monitor the "social mediasphere" for the latest trends and occurrences (Sullivan, 2010). These editors represent news organizations like the "Associated Press," the "Tampa Tribune" and the "Austin American-Statesman" (Gleason, 2010). While the George Washington University survey did not specifically mention Reddit and Digg, social media editors could be well served if they paid more attention to these two sites and similar others.

Additionally, the uniqueness of the users on Reddit and Digg adds significance to the trends discussed above. Unlike other social media users who simply opine or post videos and tweets, Reddit and Digg users read both mainstream and non-mainstream news sites. They even go further and read blogs and other social media sites and post relevant articles and videos online. Those users who want to see their posts gain prominence have to get interesting stories then edit the headlines to make them even more attractive to their online peers. Furthermore, users get points for their usefulness to the community; a "popularity ratio" score on Digg and a "link karma" score on Reddit. This means that there is an issue of responsibility and an emphasis on ethical standards. Even those who do not post articles take time to read what is on the site, then vote and comment on it. These dynamics denote savvy media users who are strategic and selective in

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2. A comprehensive list of social media editors is available at: http://twitter.com/sreenet/socmedia-editors

their news preferences. This news democratization process indeed deserves more attention from the mainstream media.

In conclusion, even though Reddit and Digg do not dominate the world of social media as Facebook and Twitter do, their unique processes are significant nonetheless. When used in conjunction with various audience and readership tracking methods, social news sites afford the news media an opportunity to shape news content for a better fit for readers. The appointment of social media editors is an important step towards this goal. However, due to the relative newness of this position, more research is needed to examine how the said editors are using different social media sites to improve news content.

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